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Noel O'Sullivan, Christ and Creation: Christology as the Key to Interpreting the Theology of Creation in the Works of Henri de Lubac

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Noel O'Sullivan, *Christ and Creation: Christology as the key to interpreting the theology of creation in the works of Henri de Lubac*. Religions and Discourse 40. Bern: Peter Lang, 2009, 490 pp. £52

Well-known for his subversion of the supernatural–natural categories that were basic to Catholic theology until the mid-twentieth century, Henri de Lubac might be regarded as having neglected Christology, not least by his own admission. But Noel O'Sullivan's careful study demonstrates that he in fact develops a coherent set of insights, which when brought together are rightly viewed as a Christology.

The study's research value is partly synthetic, drawing together material from different areas of de Lubac's extensive corpus. Key shorter texts are examined in detail, notably 'The Light of Christ' (pp. 282–99, from *Theology in History*). Furthermore, other important fragments are brought into discussion for the first time: an unpublished essay 'Sur la liberté du Christ' (pp. 299–311, 353–5), an apophatic mystical reflection (pp. 373–8, an appendix to Michel Sales' *L'Être humain*) and a meditation on the Way of the Cross (pp. 387–91, an appendix to the 2003 Cerf edition of *Catholicisme*). O'Sullivan rightly delineates de Lubac's Christology more systematically and concretely than in the two previous studies of the topic, Étienne Guibert's *Le Mystère du Christ* (2003) and Donath Hercsik's *Jesus Christus* (2001).

In Part One, de Lubac's Christology is situated in the context of better-known aspects of his theology. His openness to engage secularizing forms of thought is well-known, but needs to be recognized as resulting from the profound conviction that Christ is the light for all people. Although de Lubac rightly identifies his project as fundamental theology rather than apologetics in the classic mould, it rests on unshakeable Christian foundations. He contests the secular exaltation of autonomous human subjectivity by offering an alternative view of human dignity deriving from God's image and likeness. The two are intrinsically linked: likeness is the full realization of who the human is from the beginning, and is grown into through time. But this '1942 definition', which enumerates as divine prerogatives reason, freedom, immortality and dominion, is significantly nuanced in *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (1965). Giving more weight to divine paradox, de Lubac there acknowledges more explicitly than before God's incomprehensible aspect. Given that humanity is in God's image, this incomprehensibility must be mirrored in humanity. Here is the true meaning of de Lubac's *abyssus abyssum invocat* imagery: that human knowledge of God can be no more complete than human self-knowledge, being a path of continuing discovery pursued in the

depths of one's being, led by the spirit that, along with body and soul, constitutes tripartite humanity (1 Thes. 5.23).

These depths issue not in irrationality, nor absurdity, but in the entirely concrete Mystery of Christ, with the concept of paradox therefore a 'statement of a problem rather than its resolution' (p. 243). The contradictions inherent in the categories of supernatural and natural relation—which entered ecclesial usage only in counter-Reformation polemic—are resolved in Christ. The grace of the supernatural is the grace of Christ, who is himself the mediator of perfection. This vision impels de Lubac's incarnational Christology, in which incarnation is revelatory as well as redemptive. Christ is 'the revelation of God's plan for the creature from the beginning' (p. 257), with creation ordered to incarnation.

Part Two explores how this theology attains greater Christological specification. As already intimated, de Lubac's Christology is from the start Trinitarian and posits a model of revelation unfurled progressively. He proclaims: 'The intrinsic transcendence of Christianity lies in the irruption of the Spirit of Christ into a world where he had been announced but the radical nature of the event had not been anticipated.' (pp. 292–3) The locus of this irruption is an encounter that from the human perspective is faith, and from God's viewpoint revelation.

It is therefore important, de Lubac argues, to distinguish the religion of Jesus from the religion of Christ. The religion of Jesus is only attainable by humankind through the religion of Christ, which is the cult of incarnate Love. O'Sullivan contends: 'Taking Jesus as model and norm of life will not effect a transformation in us that is necessary if we are to imitate him. This can only be brought about by recognising that Jesus is the human face of divine Love.' (p. 296) Divine love is thus realized in 'divinity united to a particular nature in the person of Jesus Christ', who thereby communicates that love to humankind. This communication is always free, with this freedom encompassing and unifying Christ's divine and human wills.

Drawing on Hilary of Poitiers' concept of *concorporatio*, Lubac develops a bold vision of all humankind gathered into Christ in both life and death. From the first moment of his existence, Christ carries all humankind with him. He takes humankind with him to Calvary and raises humankind with him from the dead. In this sense, humankind co-operates in its own salvation. This need not compromise the particularity of the hypostatic union, however: just as Father and Spirit are united to the Son but not incarnated, so humankind lives in union with Christ but does not become a single person with him. Moreover, just as there are not three gods but one God, so humankind exists strictly as a singular, if differentiated, communal body. Furthermore, human unity with Christ is collective and

public, not particular or personal. In Trinitarian context, divine likeness can only be communitarian.

In his incarnation, Jesus Christ is the revelation of God for humankind. De Lubac celebrated *Dei Verbum*'s recognition of this fact in its first chapter, deeming the short document the Council's most important text. But how does Christ reveal himself? Partly through exegeting scripture, supremely in his Passion. De Lubac affirms: 'Jesus is Exegete of the scriptures above all in the act whereby he fulfils his mission, in that solemn hour for which he came: in the act of his sacrifice, at the hour of his death on the Cross. It is then that he says in substance: "Behold I make all things new."' (p. 385) Jesus Christ is not only the object of revelation but its subject, unifying the historical and spiritual senses of interpretation, which are analogues for the fleshly and divine natures of the Logos. Thus is he author of scripture as well as author of the book of nature—a correspondence making possible his further identification as Wisdom. Christ also reveals himself in the Church, his body, which following the Shepherd of Hermas is an old woman created before all things, not simply a community of believers making sense of who Christ is for them today. In these ways, the true meaning of belief in Christ comes into view: a dynamic movement of faith and understanding originating in Christ and returning to Christ. The concept of the supernatural helps keep this Christic subjectivity continually in view.

O'Sullivan shows how Christ arrives in de Lubac's theology like a thief in the night: unexpected by many, but with comprehensive transformative power. One avenue, compatible with O'Sullivan's approach, that could have been explored is a comparative approach to de Lubac's Christology via his extensive yet neglected writings on Buddhism, in which the Buddha and Buddhist anthropology are presented partly as foils for discussions of Christ and Christian anthropology. Such a comparative dimension would have furthered the book's stated aim of contextualizing de Lubac for the present day. De Lubac did not view Buddhism as no more than a 'form of Oriental atheism' (p. 362)—witness his concluding appraisal in 'Faith and piety in Amidism' (in *Theological Fragments*) of Christ as the 'only "true Amida"'. Nevertheless, O'Sullivan undoubtedly offers systematicians suggestive new avenues into de Lubac's theology, as well as mapping out paths for philosophical theologians into his Christology.

David Grumett

University of Exeter